

Anton Bruckner

Locus Iste

Introduction

Locus iste is one of over thirty small-scale sacred choral pieces by Bruckner, dating from all stages of his compositional career. Indeed, the first of them, a setting of the hymn *Pange lingua*, is thought to date from 1835 or 1836, when the composer would have been only eleven years old, and the last, *Vexilla Regis*, another hymn setting, dates from 1892, only four years before the end of his life.

The majority of these compositions would be described as 'motets', a genre that can be defined as a sacred polyphonic composition with Latin text, with or without an instrumental accompaniment.

The sources of the texts that composers used for motets usually originated in the so-called 'Proper' of the Roman Catholic liturgy. Proper chants were those which changed day-by-day (Introit, Gradual, Sequence, Offertory and Communion), as opposed to the fixed part of the Mass, the 'Ordinary' (Kyrie eleison, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus and Benedictus, Agnus Dei).

Though these sections of the service would often be sung to plainsong - the traditional chant of the church - they also provided an immense amount of material for composers to set to music. In *Locus iste*, Bruckner was setting the words of the Gradual in a Mass for the Dedication of a Church, the Gradual being the section which preceded the reading of the Gospel.

Anton Bruckner

Bruckner was born in 1824, and received his early training as a chorister at the Augustinian monastery of St Florian, where he eventually served as assistant teacher, training the choristers. From 1855 he was organist at Linz Cathedral, and moved to Vienna in 1868 as Professor of Harmony and Counterpoint at the Conservatory, living there until his death in 1896.

Bruckner is now celebrated as the composer of nine symphonies and such large-scale church works as four settings of the Mass and the Te Deum.

Circumstances of the First Performance

Locus iste was composed in August 1869 after Bruckner had moved to Vienna. However, its first performance took place in Linz Cathedral on 29 October of that year, at a service to dedicate a chapel within the building. The music seems designed for a large building with matching acoustic. The many rests, including the whole-bar rest at bar 43, would allow the echoing sound of one phrase to die away before the next begins.

Performing Forces and Their Handling

- Scored for unaccompanied four-part choir (soprano, alto, tenor and bass). The Cathedral Choir in Linz at that time would have been all-male, with boys singing the soprano, and perhaps also, the alto part. The size of the choir then is

uncertain, but the piece is effective, whatever the number of singers.

- Extremes of compass are mostly avoided, the range of each voice part being:

soprano	b to g''
alto	g to b'
tenor	c to e'
bass	F to c'

- Dynamics are carefully marked and require a range from *fortissimo* (bars 17-20) to *pianissimo* (bars 21-25 and 44-48). Note the sudden contrasts in dynamic level, eg bar 8 forte - bar 9 piano, the same from beat 1 to beat 2 of bar 12, and bar 20 fortissimo -bar 21 pianissimo, etc.

Texture

The motet is mainly in a four-part chordal (homophonic) texture, but note the following features:

- The bass part often leads in ahead of the other voices, eg in bar 2.
- In bars 12 and 16, the bass part begins the next phrase ahead of the other voices, leading to a loosely imitative effect in the soprano when the other three voices enter a bar later.
- In the middle section (bars 21-29), the texture is reduced to three parts, the basses being silent. In this passage, the tenor parts leads, with soprano and alto entering a bar later, imitating the rhythmic pattern of the tenor part but not the melodic line.
- From bar 26, the three parts move in a more homophonic texture as they approach the cadence in bar 29 and the recapitulation in bar 30.

Structure

The overall structure may be summarized as ternary A-B-A¹), with each of the outer sections having a different continuation after the first ten bars, and the middle section (21-29) being just nine bars long. This is defined by the texture of the music, as outlined above, and by the way the text is set.

Bars 1-20 Section A (consisting of two subsidiary sections)

1-12 **Locus iste a Deo factus est** (*This place was made by God.*)
Two closely related four-bar phrases, the second a modified repeat of the first, followed by a further four bars (1 + 3 bars), ending with an imperfect cadence

13-20 **inaestimabile sacramentum** (*a priceless mystery*)

Two four-bar phrases, the first ending with a Phrygian cadence in D minor, and the second a sequential repetition of the first, finishing with a Phrygian cadence in E minor.

Bars 21-29 Section B: **irreprehensibilis est** (*It is without reproof.*)

Differentiated by absence of bass, this is initially a series of two bar phrases in descending sequence, started by tenor and answered by soprano and alto.

The final four bars lead to imperfect cadence in C, preparing for return of Section A.

Bars 30-48 Section A (adapted)

Words as in bars 1-12

30-39 exactly as 1-10

40-42 3-bar phrase, melismatic, more chromatic setting of the word *Deo*

43 silent bar

45-48 4-bar phrase with slower-moving harmony and final perfect cadence.

Tonality

The basic tonality of the piece is C major but there are several modulations.

5-6 G major, returning to C at 7 with the F natural in the bass

15-16 Phrygian cadence in D minor

19-20 Phrygian cadence in E minor

21-29 Rapidly changing tonal scheme with much chromatic movement:

- E minor (bar 22)
- D minor (bar 24)
- Stabilises on dominant of C (imperfect cadence in bar 29)

34-35 G major (as 5-6)

Harmony

The style of harmony is basically functional, with clearly defined perfect and imperfect cadences. Other features include:

- the use of appoggiaturas and suspensions in a classical manner, with appropriate resolution, e.g. the appoggiatura at bar 4 in the soprano and the suspension at bar 40 (beat 1) in the alto.
- the use of chromaticism – 23 (alto and tenor descending a semitone)
- diminished seventh chords at bar 40 (beat 4) and bar 41 (beat 4)

Word-setting and Melody

Bruckner's setting of the text is syllabic, except for the melismatic passage at bars 40-42.

The melodic writing is mainly diatonic with regular phrase construction. Notice the following features:

- Descending step-wise line at opening
- Modified sequential repeat at bar 5, with the second note repeated rather than continuing down the scale
- Disjunct rising lines in bars 13-15, with emphatic falling fifth in bar 16
- Rising sequential repetition in bars 17-20
- Descending sequential repetition in bars 21-25

Rhythm and Metre

The piece is in simple quadruple time throughout. The rhythmic patterns are to a large extent dictated by the word-setting, in which Bruckner displays great sensitivity to the natural stresses of the Latin text. He does this by having the stronger syllables on the stronger beats of the bar, of course, but also by using longer notes at these points, eg the first syllables of 'locus' and 'factus'.

The two longer words in the text, 'inaestimabile' and 'irreprehensibilis', are both set to patterns of steady crotchets with a dotted rhythm in each case to break the regularity.

The middle section (21-29) and the final section, particularly, both end with a phrase that has longer notes than the general movement of the preceding bars. In the middle section, this occurs at the start of the last four-bar phrase in the soprano and alto parts (26-27). At the end of the piece, it occurs in the final phrase, 45-48.